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CIA Threats Against the Press

... And speaking of Chernobyl, the Reagan administration is now threatening to dust off rarely used laws to prevent the press from publishing information that the White House would prefer to suppress. It's considering criminal prosecution of several news organizations for publishing stories about U.S. intelligence-gathering operations. According to Central Intelligence Agency Director William J. Casey, that's *verboten*.

In a meeting with Washington Post editors, Casey raised the possibility of government action against newspapers and magazines for allegedly violating a 1950 statute that makes it illegal to "knowingly and willfully" disclose or publish classified information about codes, ciphers or "communication intelligence activities of the United States or any foreign government."

He also warned the Post not to publish a story it had obtained on U.S. intelligence capabilities. "I'm not threatening you," Casey said. "But you've got to know that if you publish this, I would recommend that you be prosecuted under the intelligence statute."

This is part of a pattern of expanding government secrecy and an obvious attempt at intimidation. Never before has this statute been used to prosecute a newspaper or magazine. Last fall, for the first time in 60 years, espionage laws

were invoked to convict a former naval intelligence analyst for leaking satellite photos of Soviet ship-building to a magazine. The pictures were hardly news to the Russians.

As the administration now interprets these laws, news organizations as well as their sources are subject to criminal prosecution when sensitive or embarrassing information appears in print. But fortunately, Congress and the courts are justifiably loath to violate the Constitution by keeping newspapers and magazines from publishing freely. The CIA and the Justice Department should display a similarly respectful attitude toward this revered document.